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Widescreen

Widescreen Aesthetics and Mise en Scene Criticism

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I know only one film in CinemaScope that added anything of importance to the mise en scene, namely Otto Preminger's *River of No Return* . . .

—Andre Bazin [1]

An adequate theoretical account of widescreen filmmaking does not yet exist, but the most important step toward it was taken by a tradition that is usually considered "Bazinian." The *Cahiers du cinéma* critics of the 1950s and early 1960s and the *Movie* critics of the 1960s have left us a rich legacy of ideas about the aesthetics of the wide screen. It is worthwhile to glance back at this "mise en scene" criticism (as I shall call it) in order to assess its theoretical premises and conclusions—to ask, even, to what extent it is accurately called "Bazinian." Of course, there are significant differences between *Cahiers* and *Movie* and many divergences within each journal's corps of contributors; still, I think that some generalizations hold good about basic premises and broad trends. Since the widescreen aesthetic was constructed almost completely in relation to the American cinema, my inquiry will also consider the place of Hollywood and its auteurs within mise en scene criticism. I shall conclude with some suggestions for further work on widescreen aesthetics.

Bazin and the Revisionists

It comes as no surprise when a reader of today, happening upon two batches of essays in early numbers of *Cahiers du cinéma* (July 1953 and January 1954), discovers certain critics rhapsodizing about CinemaScope. François Truffaut finds that CinemaScope offers a more "realistic" vision than does traditional cinema or 3-D; it fulfills the idea that cinema should be a window on the world.[2] Maurice Schérer, better known as Eric Rohmer, agrees that the new format modified vision itself, restoring continuity of both time and space.[3] For Jacques Rivette, the invention of CinemaScope is the consummation of cinema's progress toward total realism, the revelation of the unique and the concrete in the tradition of Murnau and Stroheim.[4] This is what we expect from those writers who applied Bazin's aesthetic precepts to practical criticism.

Bazin's own comments at the time may seem squarely to match those of his protégés. Yet if we read attentively, a certain disparity emerges. The *Cahiers* critics reassure us that the new format will not supplant traditional stylistic devices. Here is Truffaut: "The close-ups of Victor Mature in *The Robe* are entirely convincing; soft-focus surrounds the faces as in *Notorious*; a long scene with Lauren Bacall assures us of the persistence of the *plan américain* . . ."[5] And

here is Rohmer: "I do not believe that montage effects are henceforth forbidden. The new device brings more than it takes away. Matches on action, cuts from a detail to a long shot work no less smoothly."[6] Charles Bitsch praises *A Star Is Born* for its synthesis of techniques: "Notice: fast cutting, ten-minute takes, the most skillful camera movements, the most daring match-cuts, the most difficult framings—everything is there. We finally have the material proof that in CinemaScope everything is possible."[7] Bazin, however, is for once not so catholic. He calls his *Cahiers* essay "Fin du montage" and suggests that this may indeed be the end of editing.[8] For him, CinemaScope does not offer a new range of stylistic options, new ways of telling a story starring Victor Mature or Judy Garland; the new format will tend to reduce artificiality and "expressionism," enhancing cinema's quest for its own vocation: the revelation of the real.[9] I believe that this disparity, muted as it is, helps us identify unique features of the mise en scene tradition and the aesthetics of widescreen it produced.

Bazin's general theory needs no repeating here, but recall how general a theory it is. Essays like "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," "The Myth of Total Cinema," and "An Aesthetic of Reality" construct an elaborate ontology, epistemology, and aesthetic of the film medium. Because cinema is fundamentally a photographic process, Bazin claims, it constitutes an objective record of the phenomenal world. Assuming that any artistic practice should respect the essential properties of its medium, Bazin finds the aesthetic possibilities of cinema to depend upon recording and revealing such aspects of reality as the concreteness of behavior, space, and time; the continuity of space and time; and the stubborn otherness of things, their refusal to submit wholly to our perceptual projects—a quality Bazin calls "ambiguity." Bazin considers certain filmmakers—Flaherty, Murnau, Renoir, the Italian neorealists, and others—to have found stylistic means for exploring these facets of phenomenal reality. These filmmakers do not simply present a new set of conventions; they go beyond convention to present vital qualities characteristic of the human's "being in the world." It is worth noticing that Bazin is not quick to praise most Hollywood filmmakers in this respect. He claims that the classical studio filmmaking of the 1930s derives its power from successful genres and a codified analytical editing that still violates the spatial and temporal continuum of the world. From American filmmakers Bazin singles out chiefly Welles and Wyler for their advances in restoring spatial and temporal unity to the scene through "deep focus" and the long take. The point is not that Bazin prefers these directors to others but that he supports his judgements by reference to a general theory of film's nature and functions, a theory as much metaphysical and epistemological as it is aesthetic.

The mise en scene critics of *Cahiers* and *Movie* did not follow Bazin in asking, "What is cinema?" As practicing critics, they sought guideposts for recognizing good filmmaking in a tradition they admired, the classical studio cinema. They singled out the director as an expressive creator who could be compared to a poet, novelist, or painter. By way of constructing a *politique des auteurs*, *Cahiers* and *Movie* critics significantly revised Bazin's key ideas. What became central was not phenomenal reality but the profilmic event (the action staged for the camera), conceived as the scripted narrative situation. In an influential formulation, Astruc wrote in 1948: "We have come to realize that the meaning which the silent cinema tried to give birth to through symbolic association exists within the image itself, in the development of the narrative, in every gesture of the characters, in every line of dialogue, in those camera movements which relate objects to objects and characters to objects."[10] Not image and reality but image and narrative, image and character, image and dialogue. V.F. Perkins, the critic probably most aware of recasting Bazin's views, put it more concisely: "The photographic narrative film occupies a compromise position where a fictional 'reality' is *created* in order to be recorded."[11] Can we imagine Bazin clapping inverted commas around "reality" in this fashion? As a corollary, whereas Bazin's realism emphasized the concreteness of actual behavior (the neorealist actor *is* before he performs), the mise en scene critics emphasized skilled acting. Godard, for instance, asserted that all the cinema could reveal of an inner life are "the precise and natural movements of well-trained actors."[12]

If the profilmic event is primary, direction becomes a matter of creating meaning from within the event; if phenomenal reality has become dramatic action, the director must use film technique to interpret the drama without destroying its basis. Action must speak for itself. The American cinema's love of medium shots, Roger Leenhardt suggests, is related to a desire to portray the dramatic situation quickly and cleanly.[13] All technique becomes subordinated to the staging of the fictional action. Perkins, for instance, devotes most of *Film as Film* (1972) to showing how color, sound, camerawork, and editing can all be used unobtrusively to communicate meanings already implicit in the action or to suggest a directorial attitude without imposing one.

Bazin's conception of ambiguity undergoes a similar revision. His ontological axiom seeks to ground film's ambiguity in the medium's recording capacity. The result is that the spectator gains an existential perception of the inexhaustible richness of the world. For the mise en scene critics, though, ambiguity is not perceptual but interpretive and thematic, reflecting the subtle craft of the author. Now Bazin's account constituted a potentially severe attack on conceptions of conventional unity in the art work. The notion of ambiguity, as Dudley Andrew has pointed out, entailed an openness to accident, contingency, and the sheer otherness of phenomenal reality.[14] But by making ambiguity a textual device, allied with literary conceptions of richness and depth of meaning, the mise en scene critics cast their lot with intrinsic order and unity.

In such ways, Bazin's aesthetic principles, which were grounded in a comprehensive theory of cinema, became the basis for a connoisseurship. Mise en scene criticism narrowed a broad theory of cinema to a rationale for superior aesthetic effects. In the process, Bazin's conception of realism, an ontological one which challenged solely stylistic conventions of verisimilitude, became a new standard, a canonized style. Bazin's criteria for a good film, as much metaphysical and moral as aesthetic, were replaced by criteria characteristic of classical art—harmony, naturalness, subtlety, and unobtrusive control.

Mise en scene criticism, in England, France, and the United States, succeeded to a great degree in imposing its reading of Bazin. To this day, general opinion tends to ignore Bazin's overall theory and to relegate him to the role of prescriptive stylistician. A film is "Bazinian" if it uses long takes and deep-focus; Bazinian "mise en scene" is used as a foil to "Eisensteinian" montage. At a more sophisticated

level, the mise en scene critics were among the first to launch systematic and detailed *interpretations* of film style. Unlike Bazin, these critics sought to interpret Hollywood films thematically—by no means a common practice before the 1950s. These critics presupposed a denotative narrative level achieved and maintained in the course of the film. Personal style was added to that level; critical interpretation had as its job to treat the stylistic overlay as thematic commentary. Significantly, the discovery of expressive individuality in Hollywood filmmaking coincided with the rise of the "art cinema" in Europe, Scandinavia, and elsewhere. Both *Cahiers du cinéma* and *Movie* took a model of the creator from the art cinema and applied it to Hollywood. As *Movie* critic Jim Hillier put it, "The strategy was to talk about Hawks, Preminger, etc. as artists like Buñuel and Resnais."[15] As a result, the auteur critics imported into their discussion of Hollywood films many reading protocols favored by the art cinema. Style was an abstract gloss on story. Godard's notorious quip that a tracking shot is a question of ethics is symptomatic of the tendency to assign abstract meanings to isolated technical devices. The art cinema's "expressionistic" side suggested motivating setting, lighting, cinematography, and editing by character psychology or directorial interjection.

It is now easier to grasp the differences that underlie the disparity between Bazin's reactions to widescreen and those of his protégés. For Bazin, it extends cinema's ability to reveal aspects of phenomenal reality. For the mise en scene critics of *Cahiers*, the new format enhances Hollywood's expressive resources while still respecting canonized principles of style, especially the primacy of the profilmic event. Given the early date of the discussion, it is in fact likely that the emergence of widescreen cinema played a key role in consolidating the mise en scene aesthetic generally.

The scattered comments of the *Cahiers* critics in 1953-1954 do not qualify as a thoroughgoing exposition of a widescreen aesthetic. It was the *Movie* group who, somewhat later, provided this. The fundamental essay is Charles Barr's extraordinary "CinemaScope: Before and After" of 1963.[16] This article neatly summarizes the basic premises of the mise en scene tradition as it had been developed by the close interpretive criticism of *Movie*. The profilmic event is taken as primary and is identified with the fictional narrative situation: "The director selects or stages his 'reality,' and photographs it; we perceive the image, on the screen, in the course of the film. This process in itself means that the experience belongs to the 'imaginative' as opposed to the 'actual' life . . ."[17] Again we have the quotes around "reality," the severance of art from phenomenal reality. The natural subject of a film is not "being in the world" á la Bazin but rather "man in a situation," the relation of a fictional character to a setting.[18] The montage cinema is faulted not for falsifying phenomenal concreteness and facticity but for creating heavy-handed effects and a passive spectator. The director properly aims at situating his symbolism "within the event," and then controlling how the spectator sees it: the viewer's eyes "can be led to focus on detail, and to look from one thing to another within the frame with the emphasis which the director intends."[19] Throughout, the examples are drawn primarily from Hollywood films of the 1950s and 1960s. Bazin's aesthetic of open-ended investigation of reality is here transformed into an aesthetic of more or less effective stylistic choice.

In Barr's essay, the premise of mise en scene criticism leads to conclusions about widescreen filmmaking. Barr defends the CinemaScope format as a continuation of the evolution of film language, thus linking Minnelli and Ray to Renoir and Rossellini. He shows how CinemaScope encourages the sort of simultaneous presence of character and object, figure and landscape, that was achieved through camera movement and staging in *Boudu Saved from Drowning*, *The Criminal Code* and *Liebelei*. CinemaScope is to be praised for its increased possiblities for subtlety and freedom of participation. Since art should reveal, not state, CinemaScope counters the didacticism of montage with a more natural "gradation of emphasis." The frame can include "the detail which can only be really effective if it is perceived *qua* casual detail."[20] The good director will therefore not flaunt the ratio itself, as Kurosawa and Aldrich do; composition should enhance the narrative situation.[21] As for participatory freedom, the widescreen allows the viewer to notice nuances of character interaction by virtue of the director's gradation of emphasis. Whereas Bazin treats deep-focus filming and deep-space staging as simulating a situation of existential perceptual choice, Barr stresses "freedom" as a calculated effect of aesthetic unity, guided by the filmmaker: "If a 'Scope image is decently organized, the eyes will not just 'jump around and find what they want to find,' purely at random."[22] Finally, the CinemaScope format can contribute to producing symbolic and expressive meaning in the Hollywood film. In *The Tall Men*, the the emotional gulf between two characters is rendered by setting them at opposite edges of the frame; in *The True Story of Jesse James*, the horizontal stretch evokes the sense of freedom.[23] In *Rebel Without a Cause*, as James Dean watches Natalie Wood, a lateral camera movement follows her: the shot "gives us an insight into Dean's experience while at the same time remaining completely natural and unforced."[24]

Barr's essay is a landmark in film aesthetics, but for a summary instance of how the mise en scene tradition used this widescreen aesthetic in practical criticism, we could consider the case of Otto Preminger. Preminger is of importance not only because of the great amount of attention that his work attracted (numerous articles in *Cahiers*, special numbers of *Movie*, *Visages du cinéma*, and *Présence du cinéma*) but also because of some characteristic critical formulations. According to Jean-Louis Comolli, *mise-en-scéne* is "a term which takes on its full sense only in Preminger."[25] For Perkins, Preminger's films "achieve simultaneous relevance on the planes of action, thought, and feeling";[26] in *Film as Film*, only Hitchcock receives more discussion. Barr's CinemaScope essay refers constantly to *Exodus* and takes as a central example the raft scene in *River of No Return*, which *Movie* critics made the *locus classicus* of widescreen aesthetics.

Preminger is apt for this exploitation because the orthodox aesthetic could not account for the absence of a distinctive style and of a consistent moral vision in his work. For the mise en scene tradition, neutrality of style and attitude becomes his films' chief expressive feature. He "rejects every stylistic, emotional or narrative distortion . . .Preminger is committed to exact and lucid presentation."[27] Mise en scene thus achieves a rigorous transparency that effaces the author's hand: if we envision a compromise at the end of *Exodus*, we cannot decide whether to attribute the effect to the director or the characters.[28] Preminger's narrative action shines through virtually unmediated by techniques of camera or cutting. "All that he wishes to say

or show is in the development of his narrative and the moral evolution of his characters."[29] "Nothing is said; it is enough to see, it is enough that the clarity of the spectator's understanding is added to that of the author."[30] The film's ideas are not in the script (Preminger cuts all ties to the partisan theses stated in his sources) but in the profilmic event, especially in the performances. In *Advise and Consent*, Robin Wood claims, "The burden falls squarely, then, on the actors: camera-movement, camera angle, editing are all subordinated to the demand for the utmost clarity, precision and conciseness in the playing."[31] Preminger thus personifies the very task of mise en scene itself, to stage an event for the unobtrusive camera to record. For the auteurists, paradoxically, the impersonal transparency of treatment makes the films highly "personal" in their unusual rigor and their respect for the profilmic event.

Clarity of staging does not, however, foreclose thematic ambiguity. For mise en scene criticism, Preminger is not only lucid but complex and subtle. His self-effacing direction and the three-dimensionality of his characters refuse authorial omniscience. Perkins has made the point splendidly: "Hitchcock tells stories as if he knows how they end, Preminger gives the impression of witnessing them as they unfold."[32] Preminger is the most "detached" and "objective" of Hollywood filmmakers. For mise en scene critics, this impartiality creates an interpretive freedom for the spectator. Jacques Lourcelles claims that in *Daisy Kenyon*, Preminger does not prejudge Daisy's choice between her two suitors; just as she must choose, so must the viewer.[33] "His aim," notes the *Movie* group, "is to present characters, actions and issues clearly and without prejudice . . . He presupposes an intelligence active enough to make connections, comparisons and judgments. Preminger presents the evidence but he leaves the spectator free to draw his own conclusions."[34] For Bazin, ambiguity was a fundamental condition of being in the world; reality never exhausts itself in any act of awareness. For the mise en scene tradition, ambiguity is much closer to notions of richness and depth akin to those of New Criticism and the *Scrutiny* group around F.R. Leavis: by refusing authorial guidance, Preminger's films ask the viewer to weigh the incompatible and incomplete narrative material presented.

Preminger's use of the widescreen format could consequently be treated as a logical extension of his overall directorial strategies. He relies on long takes, camera movements, and staging in depth. Critics have singled out two sequences for particular notice. In *River of No Return*, Harry has lifted Kay off the raft and her valise has fallen into the current. It drifts offscreen to the right (figs. 1-2). Perkins writes: "Kay's gradual loss of the physical token of her way of life has great symbolic significance. But Preminger is not over-impressed . . .The director presents the action clearly and leaves the interpretation to the spectator."[35] As the scene continues, Kay and Harry join Matt and his son Mark on shore, with the valise still visible on the right (fig. 3). After Kay and the boy have gone off to the cabin, Harry and Matt follow (fig. 4). The camera tracks with them, and we see the valise still drifting downriver far in the background. Barr praises the integration of this detail: "The significance of the detail is not announced, it is allowed to speak for itself."[36] In both critics' accounts, a directorial choice is evaluated as a preferable rhetorical option, a more subtle way of staging the scene—"subtlety" here defined as avoiding the emphatic quality of editing yet still making style a vehicle of narrative transmission.

River of No Return (1954)

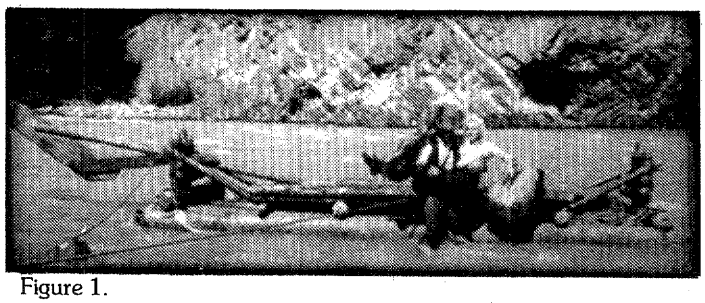

Figure 1.

Figure 2.

Figure 3.

Figure 4.

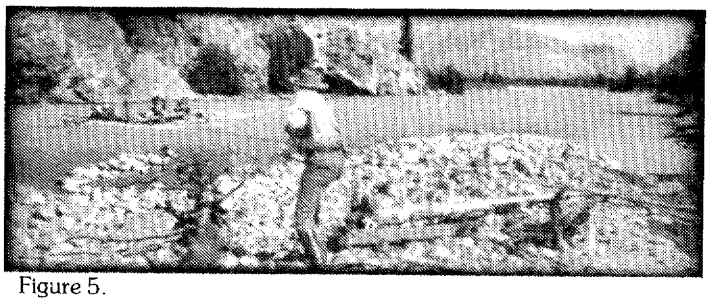

Figure 5.

The second Preminger example comes from *Carmen Jones*. Joe is driving Carmen to jail in his jeep and she tries to seduce him by singing about the joys of her favorite night spot. Perkins analyzes two shots as presenting first, Carmen's invasion of Joe's closed, ordered life (thrusting herself into his "cage," fig. 6); and then, after a cut to a sidewise angle (fig. 7), her liberation in the back seat as her song rolls on: an image of her fluid, aimless world. Perkins' interpretation reveals the thematic and expressionistic direction which stylistic analysis takes in mise en scene criticism. Lines are barriers, areas are cages, and compositions—confined or open—symbolize characters' attitudes. "The contrast between the two images summarizes the conflict between Carmen and Joe."[38] A set of interpretive conventions that have their origins in art-cinema protocols for interpreting Bergman or Antonioni are here applied to a Hollywood director; but whereas these filmmakers would have self-consciously stressed such stylistic effects, Preminger remains the servant of the fictional situation. "We can assign a specific significance to Preminger's treatment only because it brings out possibilities latent in the story and dialogue."[39]

Toward a Widescreen Aesthetic

Every tradition, Raymond Williams reminds us, is selective, taking from its predecessors what it judges necessary for its ends.[40] It would be pointless to criticize the mise en scene tradition for not adhering to Bazin's broader theory. The Bazinian revision generated film criticism of almost unprecedented sophistication. One might also argue that the split between ontological realism and a rhetoric of style is latent in Bazin's own work anyhow, though I do not believe this to be the case.[41] Nonetheless, in constructing an aesthetic of widescreen filmmaking, we too can be selective; we can borrow from the mise en scene tradition, but we can be more abstractly theoretical, less prescriptive, less committed to the profilmic-event model, more sensitive to the interplay of historical factors. I want to suggest some ways a historical poetics of Hollywood cinema would treat the stylistics of widescreen film by following up leads in the work of Bazin and of the mise en scene critics. More detailed investigation will be found in two forthcoming works.[42]

Mise en scene criticism often fruitfully exploited Bazin's insistence upon active perception in film viewing. But our scanning of a shot or our comprehension of a story is not simply controlled by the film and the filmmaker; such acts take place within intersubjective regulating principles, or *norms*. Bazin raised this point indirectly in his critique of the *politique des auteurs*:

> What makes Hollywood so much better than anything else in the world is not only the quality of certain directors, but also the vitality and, in a certain sense, the excellence of a tradition . . .The American cinema is a classical art, but why not then admire in it what is most admirable, i.e., not only the talent of this or that filmmaker, but the genius of the system, the richness of its ever-vigorous tradition, and its fertility when it comes into contact with new elements . . .[43]

Bazin's complaint revolves chiefly around the auteur critics' neglect of genres, but we can broaden the point to suggest that these critics tended to take for granted the dramaturgical and stylistic norms of Hollywood cinema as a whole. In stressing the individuality of certain auteurs, authorship theory required a conception of ordinary filmmaking as a standard of comparison. Individual style stands out only against a background; "personality" leaps to our notice only in contrast with routine filmmaking. Bazin, the principal historian of style of his generation, was concerned to analyze "the evolution of film language" and wrote extensively on the development of standardized Hollywood découpage. Yet very few mise en scene critics sought to elaborate the narrative and stylistic features of the Hollywood norm. What ordinary practices make Ophuls' camera movements or Sirk's objects privileged expressive devices? The closest most critics came were general mentions of efficient filmmaking (sometimes "elegant sobriety"), invisible technique, and smooth construction. (In such moments, mise en scene criticism sometimes functioned as an apology for dominant cinema's representational principles.) On the whole, however, mise en scene critics did not scrutinize normal filmmaking because they tended to confuse analysis with evaluation. If personal style was *ipso facto* good cinema, then "anonymous craftsmanship" was necessarily mediocre and did not warrant attention.

A historical poetics of cinema would explicitly situate widescreen filmmaking within the broader context of narrative and stylistic protocols already elaborated within classical filmmaking. Take, once more, the raft scene from *River of No Return*. Perkins and Barr correctly point out the significance of Kay's valise drifting offscreen (figs. 1-3) and eventually to the horizon (fig. 4). But the sequence emphasizes the bundle in ways which manifest the classical aim of repeating narratively salient information, particularly through several channels. When Kay drops the valise, she glances frantically toward it and cries out, "My things!" Harry shouts, "Let it go!" (fig. 2). At the same moment, the camera pans sharply to the right to reframe the valise, and a

Carmen Jones (1954)

Figure 6.

Figure 7.

Figure 8.

chord sounds on the musical track. Our later attention to the drifting bundle is just as motivated. For one thing, the bundle is initially centered when Matt and Harry pass (fig. 4). Furthermore, Preminger has anticipated this camera position a few shots earlier, when Matt ran to the edge of the bank (fig. 5). It is common for a classical film to establish a locale in a neutral way and then return to this already-seen camera setup when we are to notice a fresh element in the space. We thus identify the new information as significant against a background of familiarity. As a fresh element in a locale we have already seen from a comparable vantage point, the bundle becomes more noteworthy. In sum, Preminger's staging of the scene stands out because it avoids editing, but it uses other means to draw our attention to the bundle—centering, the return to a familiar setup, and the repetition of cues for the bundle's loss.

Emphasis, unobtrusiveness, relation to story development—each term in the mise en scene critic's lexicon calls out for what we would now call a theory of narration. Mise en scene criticism recognized that stylistic analysis of the Hollywood cinema must seek the representational functions of technical choices; but the answer was, as I have suggested, to interpret isolated stylistic gestures in terms not far from the thematic protocols of the art cinema. *Isolated* because mise en scene criticism did not on the whole expand its observation of stylistic touches to include the entire film or its background traditions. Thus the raft scene in *River of No Return* can be situated within the film's overall narrational dialectic: between a comparatively "neutralized" presentation that, as Preminger criticism recognized, favors an unselfconscious, character-centered "objectivity"; and moments which more flagrantly suppress information and overtly manipulate spectator knowledge. For example, long before the raft scene, one shot established that Matt keeps his rifle in a holster by the cabin door (fig. 9). Later a single take shows Harry's attempt to buy Matt's horse and gun (fig. 10). Matt refuses and rises to go out, reaching reflexively for his rifle (fig. 11). But the holster is empty. The rifle pokes in from frame right (fig. 12), and Harry enters, covering Matt (fig. 13).

It is a cunning scene, and a somewhat greater challenge to Perkins' and Barr's alert spectator than the valise sequence. The conversation between Matt and Harry presupposes that Harry has not stolen the rifle (why would he then offer to buy it?), so we're encouraged to assume that the rifle is in its holster. When we later realize that the empty holster has been staring at us throughout the dialogue, we gain a retroactive recognition of what we could have seen, had we looked for it. Moreover, the framing of Matt rather than Harry ostentatiously withholds story information for the sake of surprise: we're the last to know. So much for Preminger's objectivity. The shot is not simply subtle; it is deceptive; it is not the work of a director who works as if he did not know how the scene was going to end. The raft scene thus occupies one point on a continuum between "neutral" presentation and a momentary flaunting of the act of narration to achieve suspense and surprise; and in this regard Preminger perfectly illustrates classicism's range of permissible strategies.

Tracing how style manipulates audience knowledge offers an alternative to that thematization of style to which mise en scene criticism was attracted. We need not appeal to imprisoning verticals to explain the staging and framing of Harry's surprising subterfuge. But there are moments in most films, including Hollywood ones, when style is neither thematically significant nor narratively functional. Style can

River of No Return (1954)

Figure 9.

Figure 10.

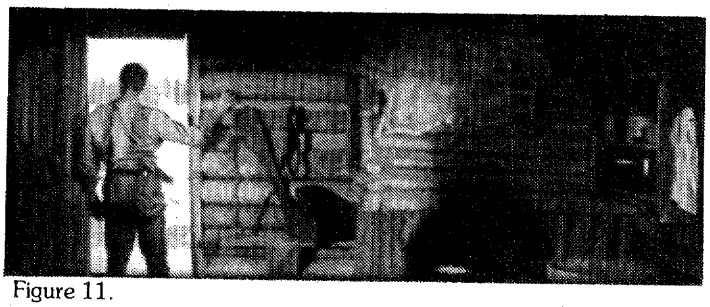

Figure 11.

Figure 12.

Figure 13.

be decorative, part of a pattern which engages our perception and clicks into order without signifying in any strict sense. Recall Perkins' passage from *Carmen Jones*. In shot 1 (fig. 6), Carmen snuggles up to Joe and starts her song, "There's a cafe on the corner." In shot 2 (fig. 7), she climbs into the back seat, continuing to sing. But there is a third shot which Perkins does not mention. After several attempts to distract Joe, she climbs up front again, and we cut to an exactly opposed view (fig. 8). The jeep is now traveling right to left and the frame is strikingly unbalanced. As Carmen ends her song, the jeep shoots out of frame. Now if shot 1 represents Joe's world (closed compartments signified by the windshield) and shot 2 represents Carmen's (flowing, open movement), whose attitude does this shot represent? If the scene aims to show that Joe is gradually succumbing to Carmen (as Perkins proposes at one point, though I find no evidence for it), surely this would be more clearly presented by continuing shot 2 as she crawls forward and draws Joe into her sphere. Moreover, what function can we attribute to the flagrant violaton of conventional screen direction in the cut from shot 2 to shot 3? Finally, why leave such a gaping hole in the right half of the shot? In sum, the cut to this third shot seems neither denotatively informative nor connotatively significant.

Now the third shot's asymmetry may be said to revive a memory-trace of Carmen's presence in the back seat, akin to our recall of the absence of the rifle in *River of No Return*. But the third shot functions principally within an audiovisual pattern presenting not just Carmen's flirtation but her song itself. Take all three shots together, and you have a highly geometricized approach to filming a musical number: head on, right profile, left profile. And the découpage chops the song into three exactly equal parts. Carmen starts singing in shot 1 and the cut comes thirty-three seconds later. Shots 2 and 3 are each thirty-three seconds long. Yet this tripartite symmetry does not correspond to the divisions in the song's verse-and-refrain pattern, which tend to come a line or so after the shot-change. And the song's closing line is: "Now you got your li'l filly at the startin' gate, got a li'l filly who is rarin' to go . . ." The last prolonged chord and word correspond to Joe's accelerating the jeep, so the visual, the verbal, and the musical fuse to conclude the song. (Again, the narration knows how the song will end.) Committed to an organicist aesthetic, Perkins looks for an invariable tie between technique and theme. But the Hollywood film does not always subscribe to canons of aesthetic unity; this cinema teems with flourishes, moments of self-congratulatory virtuosity; its ensign is motley. In the musical especially, generic convention permits the director to handle song numbers abstractly, and in this scene Preminger has simply taken a characteristically austere approach to abstraction. The decorative, appliquéd quality which stylistic patterning may achieve shows the need for a widescreen aesthetic, like all other provinces of cinepoetics, to take account not only of meanings but of perceptual *effects*.

An adequate account of a stylistic feature, then, should reconstruct the choice-situation from which it issues, that situation to include not only the functionally equivalent options not taken (deep-focus versus montage) but the boundaries which prevailing representational norms set upon all such choices. The analyst should also avoid premature thematization, granting full sway to the "rhetorical," generic, and decorative functions of style. Now all these factors will vary historically, and the analyst will seek to anchor questions of uniformity and change within some historical frame of reference. With a process like widescreen, the history of technology offers such a frame, and it is again Perkins who has the most explicit account of technological change appropriate to the mise en scene tradition. He argues that cinema accumulates technical resources (sound, color, widescreen) to present an ever-widening range of choice to the filmmaker. "As the cinema has absorbed more aspects of reality it has increased the film-maker's powers of selection . . . Only with colour as an available resource can we regard the use of black-and-white photograph as the result of an artistic decision."[44]

In some respects, CinemaScope provides a good illustration of Perkins' case. The initial 'Scope productions tended to favor fairly long takes because some editors and directors believed that extensive cutting would be disorienting in the wide format. Yet as early as 1953 an editor was claiming that one could cut 'Scope as rapidly as one might like, and certainly the opening sequence of *A Star Is Born* suggests as much.[45] By 1959, the range of shot lengths open to the 'Scope filmmaker was fully comparable to that available for non-'Scope productions. A Cukor or a Minnelli or a Preminger could continue to use the long takes he favored in pre-widescreen work, while a Kazan could make *Wild River* with an average shot length of six and a half seconds. And 'Scope certainly encouraged those directors who wanted to explore the long take; Preminger was able to shoot *Bonjour Tristesse* and *Exodus* with average shot lengths around twenty-four seconds, and *Carmen Jones* has an astonishing average of thirty-five seconds—all far higher than averages in any postwar American films I have examined.

Yet again some nuancing is required. Perkins' account of accumulating resources echoes the "asymptotic" teleology of Bazin, but Bazin glimpsed another possibility: that the history of film style might be seen as in some sense "dialectical," wrenched by breaks and new syntheses. In one essay, he hints that a steady progress in realism is not possible, that if you explore one aspect of phenomenal reality, you must introduce artifice in treating another aspect.[46] For example, the concreteness of place rendered by early neorealist films depended on filming in the streets, but then the filmmaker had to post-dub sound. Similarly, we might add, widescreen processes posed problems of color saturation in projection (one reason Hollywood converted massively to Eastman Color stock), depth of field (initial 'Scope lenses had short focal lengths), and distortion (seen at its most distracting in Cinerama and Ultra Panavision). With Cinerama, you get three vanishing points per shot (fig. 14); with 'Scope, to keep sharp focus the director often had to stage laterally. We must sometimes see technological change as not multiplying choices but adding and subtracting them.

Finally, the dialectic of technological choice and constraint will still take place within the norms of practice shared by filmmakers and audiences. For one thing, the filmmaker will often struggle to adapt the new technology to

Figure 14: **How the West Was Won** (1963).

the formal functions already canonized within the norms. Thus widescreen formats did not radically challenge, let alone overturn, classical Hollywood norms of shot composition: balance, centering of the narrative dominant, emphasis through camera position and sound (recall the floating bundle) all remained in force. Shot/reverse-shot remained a convention in 'Scope: one simply left more shoulder in one side of the frame. Even the third shot from *Carmen Jones* is not all that disorienting, especially given its generically-motivated purpose. We must also remember that within the Hollywood film industry, technology is created and developed with an eye already on its absorption into the existing aesthetic system. A technology will be introduced and developed in ways that enhance narrative vividness, spectacle, or other valuable aspects of the classical system of representation. It may remain for the filmmaker to turn the technology *against* the norms, as Oshima uses the 'Scope format to slice his characters' faces in half at the end of *A Cruel Story of Youth* (1960); or as Kurosawa uses extreme telephoto lenses to exaggerate the shallowness of anamorphic depth of field, creating compositions in which the planes are "stacked," as if as thin as cardboard (fig. 15). An aesthetic of the wide screen must reckon with the centrality of intersubjective and intertextual norms—their relation to economic and aesthetic forces, the range of choices they offer to filmmakers working within them, and the possibility of systematic violations of them.

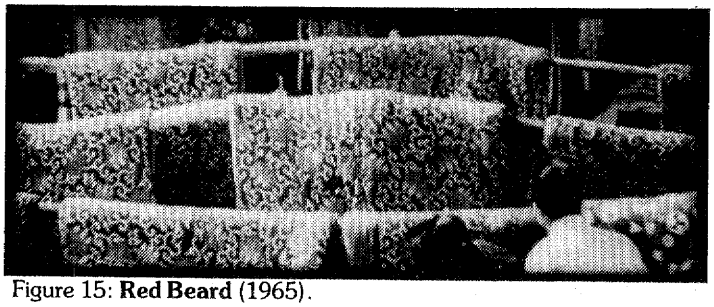

Figure 15: **Red Beard** (1965).

Notes

[1]André Bazin, *What is Cinema?* Vol. 2, ed. and trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), p. 157.

[2]François Truffaut, "En avoir plein la vue," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 25 (July 1953), p. 22.

[3]Maurice Schérer, "Vertus cardinales du CinémaScope," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 31 (January 1954), pp. 36-38.

[4]Jacques Rivette, "L'age des metteurs en scène," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 31 (January 1954), p. 45.

[5]Truffaut, "En avoir," p. 23.

[6]Schérer, "Vertus," p. 38.

[7]Charles Bitsch, "Naissance du CinémaScope," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 48 (June 1955), pp. 41-42.

[8]André Bazin, "Fin du montage," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 31 (January 1954), p. 43. See translation this issue.

[9]André Bazin, "Le CinémaScope sauvera-t-il le cinéma?" *Espirit* 12, 10-11 (October-November 1953), 683. (See translation in this issue, p. 14).

[10]Alexandre Astruc, "The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: *La Caméra-Stylo*," in Peter Graham, ed., *The New Wave* (New York: Doubleday, 1968), p. 20.

[11]V.F. Perkins, *Film as Film* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), p. 61.

[12]*Godard on Godard*, ed. Jean Narboni and Tom Milne (New York: Viking, 1972), p. 21.

[13]Roger Leenhardt, "Ambiguity of the Cinema," *Cahiers du Cinéma in English* no. 1 (January 1966), p. 47; originally published in 1957.

[14]J. Dudley Andrew, "Realism and Reality in the Cinema: The Film Theory of Andre Bazin and Its Source in Recent French Thought" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Iowa, 1972), pp. 115-116.

[15]"The Return of *Movie*," *Movie* 20 (Spring 1975), p. 17.

[16]The essay first appeared in *Film Quarterly* 16, 4 (Summer 1963), 4-24. Truncated versions are printed in Richard Dyer MacCann, ed., *Film: A Montage of Theories* (New York: Dutton, 1966), pp. 318-328, and Gerald Mast and Marshall Cohen, eds., *Film Theory and Criticism* (New York: Oxford, 1979), pp. 140-168. I cite the original version.

[17]Barr, "CinemaScope," p. 8.

[18]*Ibid.*, p. 20.

[19]*Ibid.*, p. 18.

[20]*Ibid.*, p. 19.

[21]*Ibid.*, p. 9.

[22]*Ibid.*, p. 18.

[23]*Ibid.*, p. 9.

[24]*Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.

[25]Jean-Louis Comolli, "Otto Preminger," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 150-151 (December 1963-January 1964), p. 157.

[26]Perkins, *Film as Film*, p. 131.

[27]"Why Preminger?" *Movie* no. 2 (September 1962), p. 11.

[28]Jacques Lourcelles, *Otto Preminger* (Paris: Seghers, 1965), p. 72.

[29]"Why Preminger?" p. 11.

[30]Jacques Joly, "Le génie d'analyse," *Cahiers du cinéma no. 121 (July 1961), p. 47.*

[31]*Robin Wood, "Attitudes in Advise and Consent," Movie* no. 4 (November 1962), p. 17.

[32]Perkins, *Film as Film*, p. 130.

[33]Lourcelles, *Preminger*, p. 27.

[34]"Why Preminger?" p. 11.

[35]V. F. Perkins, "*River of No Return*," *Movie* no. 2 (September 1962), p. 18.

[36]Barr, "CinemaScope," p. 11.

[37]Perkins, *Film as Film*, p. 80.

[38]*Ibid.*, p. 81.

[39]*Ibid.*

[40]Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961), pp. 67-76.

[41]For an alternative view, see Brian Henderson, *A Critique of Film Theory* (New York: Dutton, 1980), pp. x, 32-47.

[42]David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, forthcoming); David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, forthcoming).

[43]André Bazin, "La Politique des Auteurs," in Graham, *The New Wave*, pp. 143, 154.

[44]Perkins, *Film as Film*, p. 54.

[45]Barbara McLean Webb, "Pioneering in CinemaScope," *Cinemeditor* 3, 4 (December 1953), 3.

[46]André Bazin, *What Is Cinema?* vol. 2, pp. 26-27.